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ABSTRACT

This brochure, in a question-and-answer format, provides basic information about learning disabilities for faculty at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The questions address such topics as the definition of a learning disability, diagnostic criteria, documentation criteria, verifying the legitimacy of a student's request for accommodation, diagnosis after enrollment in the university, appropriate accommodations versus unfair advantages, the definition of "reasonable" accommodations, helping a student who may have an unrecognized learning disability, student self-disclosure and rights, grade expungement as a "reasonable" accommodation, and University of Illinois policies regarding accommodation of students with such disabilities. (DB)

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Frequently Asked Questions About Learning Disabilities

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16 Frequently Asked Questions About Learning Disabilities

Question 1

What is a learning disability?

The most widely espoused definition for that which constitutes a learning disability was developed by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD). According to the NJCLD:

> "Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to a central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with the learning disabilities but do not, by themselves, constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other disabilities (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences."

Question 2

What are the diagnostic criteria for a learning disability?

In reviewing diagnostic documentation for specific learning disabilities, the Division of Rehabilitation-Education Services considers four diagnostic criteria which were derived from the definition of the National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities (see question 1). These four criteria are:

1. *Exclusionary Condition.* The specific learning problem is the result of a presumed central nervous system dysfunction which does not primarily result from a sensory disability such as visual, auditory, or tactile loss or impairment; other neurological trauma or condition; a psychiatric condition; or the consequences of an impoverished or disadvantaged environment.
2. *Cognitive Potential.* The range of intellectual function is an IQ of 85 and above on either the Verbal, Performance or Full Scale IQ score as measured on the *Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised* (WAIS-R).
3. *Potential vs. Performance Discrepancies.* Two types of discrepancies are used in these evaluations: aptitude-achievement and intra-achievement. An aptitude-achievement discrepancy reflects the amount of disparity between certain intellectual capabilities of an individual and his or her actual academic performance. An intra-achievement discrepancy is present within individuals who have specific achievement deficits, such as inadequate reading comprehension or spelling skills.
4. *Chronicity.* The problems must have existed throughout the developmental stages of learning.

Question 3

What are the documentation criteria for a learning disability?

Students requesting accommodations on the basis of a specific learning disability are required to provide diagnostic documentation from a licensed clinical professional familiar with the history and functional implications of their respective disabilities. In general, it is not acceptable for such documentation to include a diagnosis or testing performed by a member of the student's family. Additionally, students requesting accommodations for the manifestations of multiple disabilities must provide evidence of all such conditions. Specifically, students requesting accommodation on the basis of a specific learning disability must provide documentation which includes, but is not restricted to, the following:

1. A diagnostic interview including a description of the presenting problem(s); developmental, medical, psychosocial and employment histories; family history (including primary language of the home and the student's current level of English fluency); and a discussion of comorbidity where indicated.
2. An assessment of global intellectual functioning as measured by the *Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised* (WAIS-R) with standard scores and scaled scores in table format of subtests.
3. The *Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery-Revised: Tests of Cognitive Ability* to corroborate the functional limitations attributable to the diagnosis, and for which academic accommodations are being requested. The standard scores, standard deviations, and percentiles of each subtest and test cluster are required in table format.
4. A comprehensive academic achievement battery (e.g., *Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery - Revised: Tests of Achievement*) with all standard scores, standard deviations and percentiles reported in table format for those subtests administered.
5. A specific diagnosis which conforms to the 4 diagnostic criteria for a specific learning disability (see question 2).

6. A clinical summary which: (1) indicates the substantial limitations to major life activities posed by the specified learning disability, (2) describes the extent to which these limitations impact the academic context for which accommodations are being requested, (3) suggests how the specific effects of the learning disability may be accommodated, and (4) states how the effects of the learning disability are remediated by the recommended accommodations.
7. The report should be on letterhead, dated, signed and include the name, title, and professional credentials of the evaluator, including information about license or certification.

Question 4

Doesn't everyone have a learning impairment?

Cognitive abilities, like all human attributes, are subject to normal variation. Thus, everyone has strengths and weaknesses in cognitive functioning. However, a learning disability is different in that the variation is extreme and causes significant functional delay or prevents learning through the involved cognitive system.

Question 5

How do I verify that a student's request for an accommodation is legitimate?

Students requesting accommodations on the basis of a learning disability should be registered with the Division of Rehabilitation-Education Services (DRES), and should have a "Request for Accommodations" letter signed by a member of the DRES staff. It is recommended that you not agree to accommodations until you have a document from DRES. Other disability-related documentation may be valid, but the process of accommodation must be uniform throughout UIUC.

Question 6

Can I ask students for specific information about the nature of their disabilities?

With very few exceptions, faculty are not entitled to information regarding the specific etiology of a student's disability. Further, disability-related information is considered confidential and, therefore, students are under no obligation to disclose that they have a disability, so long as they do not wish to request disability-related accommodations. When such accommodations are requested, UIUC policy requires that they disclose diagnostic information to DRES. DRES will subsequently provide verification to the instructor regarding whether the student is eligible for disability-related services. In addition, DRES will provide instructors with information on how the disability limits participation in relevant academic environments for the purpose of identifying and implementing reasonable accommodations.

Question 7

Why are some students diagnosed after they enroll at the U of I?

The UIUC has rigorous admissions criteria which students with and without disabilities must meet to gain entry. Thus, those with learning disabilities who gain entry typically have cognitive strengths which rank among the brightest. Throughout secondary school they were able to rely upon those strengths to do well in the less competitive pool. However, within the fast paced, highly competitive context of the UIUC, such students often find that their strengths can no longer compensate for significant weaknesses. They do poorly, seek consultation, and are subsequently diagnosed for the first time as having a learning disability. Trans

fer students from other educational institutions may have been able to continue their personal compensation strategies from high school without a formal assessment. The reports of difficulties throughout the developmental stages of learning are still needed to support a later diagnosis.

Question 8

Do accommodations give students with learning disabilities an unfair advantage?

When accommodations are objectively based upon the documented evidence of functional limitations due to disability, they simply compensate for the aforementioned limitation, and therefore are not advantageous. If the disability and/or its functional manifestations were falsely identified, the accommodations would likely be unfair due to the fact that they were not warranted. Studies have shown that when given extended time on exams, the grades of students without disabilities are not significantly improved beyond those which they achieved with normal time. However, extended time was demonstrated to significantly enhance the grades of students with disabilities necessitating this accommodation. Accommodations are designed to meet the needs of the student in a particular learning environment. Thus, the "Request for Accommodations" has an expiration date and must be renewed each semester.

Question 9

How does DRES determine the "reasonable" accommodation(s) to be provided?

The student is asked to describe the functional limitations of the particular educational environment. The

student's narrative report is compared to the functional limitations associated with the standard scores and percentiles in the evaluation report. When a match occurs, the student's need for an "appropriate" accommodation is confirmed. The "reasonableness" is related to the extent of adaptation proposed in terms of environmental adaptation, technology required, educational methods and course requirements.

Question 10

Do I have to give students with learning disabilities any accommodation they ask for in my class?

No. Instructors are not required to provide accommodations, academic modifications or auxiliary aids which would fundamentally alter the program, or which would constitute an undue financial or administrative hardship. However, instructors should always consult with DRES staff before denying any accommodation request.

Question 11

What do I do if I think a student may have a learning disability?

Ask the student if he/she would like to talk confidentially about the difficulties he/she is encountering in your class. Describe the observations upon which your suspicion of a learning disability are based. Most often they will reflect excellence in one area of course performance and mediocrity in another. Ask if the student has had these same difficulties in other classes or in the past. In-

form the student that he/she may have these difficulties evaluated to determine if they are the result of a learning disability. If the evaluation results in the diagnosis of a learning disability, accommodations must be introduced which would allow the student to better demonstrate his/her knowledge and perform better in the course. Finally, inform the student that the next step is to contact the Division of Rehabilitation-Education Services if he/she would like to further investigate whether a learning disability is present.

Question 12

Should I require students with learning disabilities to identify themselves to me at the beginning of the term to receive accommodations?

No. Students cannot be required to self-disclose. However, students with known disabilities who choose not to self-disclose accept responsibility for the consequences of that action. DRES recommends that the instructor make an access statement on the first day of class such as, "If you have some disability which may impede your full participation in this course, please see me to discuss how we may provide reasonable accommodation for your needs." In addition, DRES recommends that the following statement be included on the course syllabus:

"Disability Accommodations – To obtain disability-related academic adjustments and/or auxiliary aids, students with disabilities must contact the course instructor and the Division of Rehabilitation-Education Services (DRES) as soon as possible. To contact DRES you may visit 1207 S. Oak St., Champaign, call 333-4603 (V/TDD), or e-mail a message to <disability@uiuc.edu>. The DRES World Wide Web address is <http://www.als.uiuc.edu/dres>."

Question 13

Can I require a student with a learning disability to do something in my class that I require all other students to do?

Yes, unless the requirement would tend to discriminate against the person by necessitating behavior which is significantly impeded or precluded by the disability. In the latter case, such criteria can only be required when their removal or modification would constitute a substantial alteration of the fundamental elements of the course (including certification and/or licensure requirements), or if they were to constitute an undue financial or administrative hardship. Although the criteria for denial are rigorous, the "undue hardship" criterion is especially difficult to utilize. All courses have essential knowledge and skills which must be mastered and evaluated. If a learning disability prevents a student from demonstrating knowledge and mastery, an alternative, instructional or evaluative strategy may be developed, or an accommodation may be arranged that is not required of other students.

Question 14

Is the expungement of a grade a "reasonable accommodation?"

Possibly. The expungement of a grade is granted at the discretion of the college through the procedures developed for unusual circumstances surrounding the particular grade. If reasonable accommodations were provided in the class, or if the student chose not to self-identify and request

classroom accommodations, the student is responsible for the performance outcome. Special consideration should be given in cases where students are diagnosed as having a specific learning disability after they have performed poorly in a class in which they did not receive reasonable accommodation. Since the student was not aware of the disability or that accommodations could have been accessed, it is reasonable to allow the student, upon request, to retake the particular course or an alternative course that meets the degree requirements with accommodations in order to receive an unbiased grade that demonstrates mastery. Subsequently, contingent upon individual circumstances, it may or may not be deemed by the department to be appropriate to expunge the original grade.

Question 15

What are the University of Illinois' policies regarding the accommodation of students with such disabilities?

Rules 1 and 4 of the *Code of Policies and Regulations Applying to All Students* respectively state UIUC policy related to nondiscrimination, and the procedure whereby students may request and receive disability-related accommodations and auxiliary aids and services. The *Code of Policies and Regulations Applying to All Students* may be accessed through the Office of Affirmative Action's World Wide Web homepage at (http://www.oc.uiuc.edu/oaa/oaa.html). More specific policy and procedure information related to disability services for students may be obtained by accessing the *Disability Resource Guide* on the Division of Rehabilitation-Education Services' World Wide Web homepage located at http://www.rehab.uiuc.edu/.

Question 16

If I have questions, whom do I contact?

For additional information or to request assistance contact:

Division of Rehabilitation-Education Services
1207 South Oak Street
Champaign, Illinois 61820
(217) 333-4603 (V/TDD)
e-mail: <disability@uiuc.edu>

To obtain an alternative format of this document, persons with disabilities may contact the Office of Sensory and Testing Accommodations at the Division of Rehabilitation-Education Services, 1207 S. Oak St., Champaign, Ph: 333-4604 (V/TDD), e-mail: <sensoryandtesting@uiuc.edu>.